

Fifth Sunday in Lent

Written by the Right Reverend Donald Kirk, Bishop of Riverina

We are heading towards the purpose of Lent – being prepared to celebrate the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ – and we are nearly there. Next Sunday we will commemorate his arrival in the city of Jerusalem beginning his final journey to the Cross. Today we are invited by the gospel narrative to consider death and its significance for Jesus and for us.

Today we find Jesus in the home of Mary, Martha and Lazarus at Bethany immediately before his arrival in Jerusalem and just after he has raised Lazarus from death restoring his earthly life. A dinner is shared with them all; a celebration of life and joy with the members of the household, Jesus and his disciples.

As part of that celebration Mary does this extraordinary thing of anointing Jesus feet with expensive perfume and using her own hair to wipe it up. The sheer volume of pure Nard used was an extravagance beyond comparison and the act of letting down her hair in public was a risky thing to do ignoring the customs of the day. Mary seems carried away with the moment and her devotion to their friend.

There are three people worth noting in this story – Mary, Judas and Jesus. Each of them is reacting to something. Mary is reacting to the gift of her brother Lazarus' return to life and, whether she realises it or not, to the event that will take place in the coming week.

Judas is reacting differently. His reaction is presented by his words as care for the poor. In reality though we understand from the gospel his intentions are not so honourable. *(He said this not because he cared about the poor, but because he was a thief; he kept the common purse and used to steal what was put into it.)* [12.6] Greed was his true motive in the guise of humility and care. Judas was speaking out of self-interest and missing the significance of the moment for them all.

Jesus' reaction is an endorsement of Mary's anointing and a correction of Judas' claimed concern for the poor. Jesus did not intend to say "hey, don't worry about the poor." Rather, Jesus' comment falls in line with the spirit of the Jewish Law as in Deuteronomy 15:11 – *"Since there will never cease to be some in need on the earth, I therefore command you, 'Open your hand to the poor and needy neighbour in your land'."* So, he tells Judas he is missing the moment.

Death is a reality that most of us ignore as we live our lives. The western culture we live in tries to hide from death in ways that are unhealthy to our mental and spiritual wellbeing. When we are faced with a funeral many people try to frame it as a 'celebration of life' rather than an acknowledgement of a life lived and the grief we experience in the death of one we have known and loved. But death is something we must all face.

Mary and Martha were faced with death when Lazarus died and they sought the help and comfort of their beloved friend and teacher, Jesus. When the tomb was opened Mary warned Jesus *"already there is a stench because he has been dead for four days"* [John 11.39] The smell of death was there. When Mary anointed Jesus, it was a very different smell that overcame that previous smell. Lazarus' life was the ultimate sign that Jesus could bring life out of death. Jesus was going to his death six days later at Passover on the day we call Good Friday.

Jesus in his life, death and resurrection reveals that death is not the final word, death is not the end. We, as disciples of Christ, are reminded that death is not the end and even though we experience grief and sadness when those we know and love die, Jesus' resurrection is the promise of life.

Today we are invited to respond to God with the loving extravagance of Mary and not get caught up in the self-interested greed of Judas. Only then will we be able to offer the poor what they need and, above all, find the way to the sweet smell of life eternal!